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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 005789

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/02/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LEADER CALLS FOR BASHAR'S RESIGNATION

Classified By: CDA Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Long-time SARG critic Riad al-Turk publicly called for President Bashar al-Assad to step down earlier this week, a statement which has since been circulated among Damascus civil society as a petition for signature. Press reports and contacts indicate that other prominent activists are holding back from endorsing Turk's call. The SARG has not taken any action yet against Turk for this statement.

¶2. (C) RIAD TURK'S CALL FOR BASHAR'S RESIGNATION MOBILIZES OPPOSITION: Prominent opposition leader Riad al-Turk demanded the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad as a way out of the "current crisis" during an interview on London-based satellite station al-Demokratiya on October 30. Turk, one of the most prominent signers of the Damascus Declaration, stated that "our experience with the five-year rule of Bashar al-Assad has shown to wide circles of Syrians that he did not prove his merits as an experienced politician or sophisticated statesman...As a result, the country encountered difficulties that should have been avoided and the latest was the extension for Lahoud, then the killing of Hariri." (Note: Turk, long-time Communist Party leader in Syria, was imprisoned by Hafez al-Assad for nearly twenty years. Turk is considered by age and his long years in prison as the dean of the opposition and civil society in Syria).

¶3. (C) Turk's statement, and the lack of SARG response to it, have been lauded by a number of civil-society activists as an important moment that has served to embolden the opposition. Activists Mohammed al-Hasani and Anwar al-Bunni both explained that Turk's prominence and age have made him 'untouchable' for regime retaliation, leaving the way open for him to make highly charged statements like this. According to Bunni, Turk's statement to al-Demokratiya is now being circulated throughout Damascus civil-society circles as a petition to be published in the near future. However, at least one civil-society activist, Maan Abdul Salam, told Poloff that he will not sign for fear of losing SARG permission to hold workshops and receive foreign funding for projects.

¶4. (C) Comment: Press reports indicate that many other prominent activists are also holding back from endorsing Turk's call. In the current atmosphere, with cross-currents of nationalism and anti-Americanism, and criticism of the regime whipping through the opposition and Syrian society at large, it is doubtful if Turk's controversial call for Asad's resignation will gain much public support. The fact that Turk made it, and has not been jailed or harassed, however, shows--as the Damascus Declaration did last month-- that the regime feels itself under intense international scrutiny, and must be cautious as it moves to silence its critics .
SECHE